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Migration and Conflict in a Global Warming Era: A Political Understanding of Climate Change

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Abstract: This special issue explores underrepresented aspects of the political dimensions of global warming. It includes post- and decolonial perspectives on climate-related migration and conflict, intersectional approaches, and climate change politics as a new tool of governance. Its aim is to shed light on the social phenomena associated with anthropogenic climate change. The different contributions aim to uncover its multidimensional and far-reaching political effects, including climate-induced migration movements and climate-related conflicts in different parts of the world. In doing so, the authors critically engage with securitising discourses and resulting anti-migration arguments and policies in the Global North. In this way, they identify and give a voice to alternative and hitherto underrepresented research and policy perspectives. Overall, the special issue aims to contribute to a critical and holistic approach to human mobility and conflict in the context of political and environmental crisis.

Keywords: climate change; environmental migration; environmental justice; North–South relations; climate change politics; conflict; intersectionality; adaptation; vulnerability; postcolonial studies

1. Governing the Effects of Anthropogenic Climate Change

We now have a better understanding than ever of the social phenomena associated with anthropogenic climate change, as well as of its multidimensional and far-reaching political effects. These effects include climate-induced human mobility and climate-related conflicts about the distribution of, and access to, natural resources. Academic discourse and public debate around these topics have been pursued from myriad angles, yielding a diverse array of results. While empirical findings have shown that global environmental change engenders predominantly South–South movements (Weber 2015), internal displacement within the Global South (Foresight 2011), or immobility (Black et al. 2013; Zickgraf and Perrin 2017; Zickgraf, this Special Issue (SI)), securitisation discourses and anti-migration policies are currently gaining ground in the Global North (Baldwin et al. 2014; Fröhlich 2017; Rothe 2015). Furthermore, disenfranchised or marginalised groups are affected much more severely by climate change than elites; the intersectional discrimination that results from this is often insufficiently addressed in negotiation processes linked to the issue of environmental migration (Kajiser and Kronsell 2014). Lastly, conflicts linked to climate change are mostly—but not exclusively—non-violent, and climate change effects are not usually singular drivers of conflict, but rather inseparable from socio-political and economic dynamics (Ide et al. 2020; Brzoska and Fröhlich 2016). All of these findings and debates illustrate the inherently political and normative character of the nexus between climate change, migration and conflict (Baldwin and Bettini 2017). The authors of this special issue have chosen from among a wide range of analytical approaches and perspectives to bring these often-hidden

dimensions and contexts of climate change discourses, politics and interventions to the forefront in their respective research topics.

What becomes obvious looking at the fast-growing body of literature on climate change, migration and conflict is the fundamentally disparate narratives that are used to frame research topics, grey literature, policy papers and other publications in which these issues are negotiated. Some scholars and policymakers focus on securitisation, others on climate justice; some talk about how humans can or should adapt, others take the hopeful view that we as a species are resilient and will find a way to survive. Unfortunately, many of the approaches frame the discussion on climate change in a reductionist, depoliticised way (critical, from different perspectives: [Whyte et al. 2019](#); [Boas et al. 2019](#)). Differing epistemologies (and a variety of so-called “epistemic communities”), competing political agendas and clashing ontologies lead to diverging ways climate change is linked to social effects ([Klepp 2017](#)). These debates are rarely used as an “imaginative resource” ([Hastrup and Olwig 2012](#)) to discourse proactively about the world in which we want to live; on the contrary, they help create conditions of fear, exclusion and discrimination. A recent EU Horizon 2020 funding call shows how much even public funding schemes for research have taken on a logic of securitisation, speaking about climate migration as a “real threat” to European security, which runs contrary to most empirical findings (cited in [Boas et al. 2019](#)).

This shows how deeply racist and racialised many narratives are in the realm of climate research and climate politics ([Baldwin and Erickson 2020](#)), and how important the role of language is in this regard. In particular, the concept of mobility justice can be instructive in uncovering such dynamics. “Mobility justice” emerged from the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies ([Sheller 2018b; 2018a](#)), and can help us better understand the conditions that restrict or constrain mobilities. The concept recognises that while mobility is a fundamental aspect of daily life for people everywhere, access to mobility is often experienced unequally along lines of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, age and social class. Mobility justice (or the lack thereof) is reflected in societal discourses on migration, as state power relies on policy categories to sort, to include and exclude and to distinguish between individuals and groups. In a migration context, categorisations or ‘labels’ are used to signify whether a person belongs, deserves protection, or is considered willing to integrate. Such labels often follow a binary logic and deny the complexity of migration trajectories and identities. For instance, people moving to diversify their economic income are often labelled “expats” if they have a Northern/Western background, but “economic migrants” if they hail from non-industrialised states; such labels have a direct impact on the normative dimensions of integration policies. Similarly, the labelling of forced migrants as ‘refugees’ or ‘irregular migrants’ ([Squire 2011; Carling 2017](#)) is central to formal and informal efforts to govern migration ([Allen et al. 2018; Crawley and Skleparis 2018](#)) and key to legal protections migrants can access. Scholarship has highlighted the socially constructed nature of such categories, and approaches such as intersectionality ([Carastathis et al. 2018](#)), de-migrantisation ([Dahinden 2016](#)) and groupness ([Brubaker 2002, 2010](#)) stress how complex and fluid they are. Nevertheless, neither academic research nor policy-making has found a way to work without categories and simultaneously generate tangible positive effects on migrants’ lived realities ([Erdal and Oeppen 2017](#)).

In order to establish more unbiased language in the realm of climate migration and to acknowledge the variety of migration realities that might be linked to environmental and climate change, some scholars have urged for a terminology shift “from climate migration to climate mobilities” or to “Anthropocene mobilities” ([Boas et al. 2019; Baldwin et al. 2019](#)). This special issue draws attention to such alternative, underrepresented research perspectives on second-order effects of climate change (e.g., through the effects of climate change politics) and identifies new ways of communicating research through co-operation with the visual arts.

So-called second-order effects can be observed in new configurations within North–South interactions and international cooperation projects. Climate change politics and international cooperation are increasingly exploring the possibilities of climate change as a new tool of governance ([Klepp and Chavez-Rodriguez 2018](#)), investing growing funds in climate-related interventions, such as

adaptation and mitigation. The aims and purposes of these new tools of governance are still far from obvious and can be manifold. Control of, and access to, resources—for instance, through adaptation narratives (Vázquez 2017) or (re)territorialisation and reconstruction of statehood linked to climate policies and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) projects (Hein 2019)—can be understood as second-order effects of climate policies. When actors such as international organisations gain importance and their voice grows stronger, they can influence the power–knowledge nexus that is so crucial in climate and adaptation politics (Morchain 2018; Eriksen et al. 2015; Cameron 2012). These political implications and effects of climate change policies and adaptation or mitigation interventions are often neither recognised nor transparent. Power relations on the ground and local, indigenous knowledge are rarely taken into consideration. This can lead to shifting power relations, and in the worst case, it can weaken the most vulnerable. Although the articles in this SI focus on different world regions, all of them tackle the under-studied aspect of the justice implications of such political second-order effects of climate change. To gain a deeper understanding of the justice dimension of climate politics, and in the interest of achieving fairer and more transparent climate governance, we suggest analysing the asymmetrical knowledge production; the hidden ontologies of climate interventions; and the power–knowledge nexus in the fields of climate science, international cooperation and climate finance (Boas et al. 2019).

This interdisciplinary SI also brings together different ways of “doing” research. Due to varying disciplinary methods, professional cultures and empirical material, the articles assembled here present a range of methods and scales of analysis. This gives us the opportunity to benefit from various modes of understanding, tracking and even visualising the climate change–politics nexus. We are especially pleased that we had the opportunity to include the artistic research project “Climate Justice in Kiribati” in this volume. Such new ways of communicating research provide us with epistemological opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the topic at hand, as the co-operation leading to this photo exhibition illustrates.

2. The Papers in this Special Issue

This special issue explores underrepresented aspects of the political dimensions of global warming, including post- and decolonial perspectives on climate-related migration and conflict, intersectional approaches, and climate change politics as a new tool of governance. For instance, the case studies from the Pacific Islands discussed in this issue question the conceptual and theoretical constrictions that we are often encountering in debates on climate change and mobility. The Pacific region, or Oceania—as the islanders prefer to call this region from a post-colonial perspective—has become an iconic place for debates on “drowning islands”, “climate migration”, “climate refugees” and the like (Farbotko 2010; Baldwin and Bettini 2017; Klepp 2018).

There are three major reasons for this focus on Oceania: First, the recent effects of climate change have been severe in this region, and predictions about the future of the region are even more dire, including scenarios such as rising sea levels (predominantly in coastal areas), an intensification of the strength of cyclones, changing rainfall patterns and droughts, and increasing coastal erosion (IPCC 2014).

Second, the “multidimensional inequality” that Dietz discusses in relation to the effects of climate change and the relationship between the Global North and South (Dietz 2009) is especially applicable to Pacific Island countries (PICs). Many PICs suffer from structural inequalities at various levels. Their colonial histories evince the development of these “multidimensional inequalities” (ibid.), as the people of these islands have endured forced labour, forced migration and the plundering of their land’s natural resources (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018). Given their historical and current low per capita emissions, they bear little responsibility for anthropogenic climate change, yet they are among those most strongly affected by it. This recognition leads us directly to the core of the climate justice debate and its political implications.

The third main reason that Oceania has become a bellweather in climate debates is that it has become a laboratory to study the social effects of climate change that draw on racist, stereotypical and victimising images of the inhabitants of Oceania. Pacific Islanders have become an iconographic warning symbol, a “canary in the coalmine”, and distorted images of the victimisation of islanders are frequently used to answer questions concerning the relationship between climate change and human mobility (Farbotko 2010; Fröhlich and Klepp 2018). The agency of those affected is often denied in such discourses, which focus instead on alarmist numbers, scenarios and models, and draw racist pictures of helpless refugees from the Global South. Such discourses are not helpful in understanding the complexity of migration decisions, or in addressing the political root causes of migration or aspects of climate justice in the first place (Fröhlich and Klepp 2018; Baldwin and Bettini 2017).

In this special issue, we aim to diversify these discourses by including voices from within Pacific Island communities. The case studies discussed by Tammy Tabe (Gilbert Islands, today Kiribati; Solomon Islands) and Annah Piggott-McKellar, Karen McNamara, Patrick Nunn and Seci Sekinini (Fiji) each take a different approach. Based on extensive archival studies and ethnographic fieldwork, Tammy Tabe gives us rare insights into what forced relocations by the British colonial government have meant in the past and currently mean to the people of the Southern Gilberts. Due to poor planning and lacking any sort of participatory mechanisms or informed consent (Tabé, this issue), Gilbertese families were re-located to the Phoenix Islands in the late 1930s and then resettled in the 1950s and 1960s to the Solomon Islands due to environmental degradation. Annah Piggott-McKellar, Karen McNamara, Patrick Nunn and Seci Sekinini present two recent cases of Fijian villages whose residents were relocated within their own customary land due to climate-related hazards, following a step-by-step plan that included a neighbourhood consultation process (Piggott-McKellar et al., this issue). Both studies contribute to the still scarce empirical literature on relocation processes and mainly address the social implications and hardships thereof. The main takeaway from both of these articles is that the power to decide and act during the relocation process must lie with those affected—a perspective often missing in climate change and mobility research. “Successful” relocation hinges on questions of agency, which in turn is an issue of justice and ownership. This fact has become obvious since the first relocation processes in the post-colonial era. The Fijian cases illustrate that even in planned, “voluntary” relocations to a nearby place, the social cost is not to be underestimated. Cultural factors play an important role; for instance, lost access to sacred places can be painful and negatively affect the community (Piggott-McKellar et al., this issue). The risk of losing one’s identity and agency and the feeling of up-rootedness during and after relocation become even clearer from a historical perspective.

Tammy Tabe takes up important questions of framing and conceptualising climate change and mobility in different ways, borrowing from Rudiak-Gould (2013), who underlines that in Oceania, people feel that migration is not an answer to climate change or a way to adapt, but rather “a genocide” (Rudiak-Gould 2013), as people are losing their communities, language and culture. Land is of utmost importance in Oceania, it has a spiritual reference of high priority, also because the ancestors are buried here, that give you guidance and security. (Hofmann 2014).

Both articles address research gaps with thick empirical and historical material and, in this way, dissociate themselves from alarmist or victimising approaches. Oceania is illustrated as a region where relocation happened in the past and where it will happen in the future, and the importance of hearing Pacific Island voices in the relocation process is underscored. In fact, most regions of the world have experienced a lot of mobility in the past, which should normalise and de-sensationalise our mostly sedentary perspectives on human life (Hastrup and Olwig 2012). From a perspective of climate justice, such an alternative perspective politicises climate mobility. As migration is already happening with the involvement of official institutions, we need to ask ourselves whether Oceania should be seen as a model in the emerging field of socially responsible and acceptable climate change relocation. Furthermore, we should consider less concrete but more radical and emancipatory processes where “Pacific solidarity” and new approaches to transnational citizenship are being developed (Klepp 2018).

The article by Celia Ruiz-de-Oña, Patricia Rivera-Castaneda and Yair Merlin-Uribe demonstrates how the field of climate change adaptation is often plagued by reductionist discourses and policies. By applying a trans-scalar approach and by introducing us to the socio-economic and political complexities of the lives of coffee farmers who have to cope with changing climates and coffee leaf rust in the trans-border region of Mexico and Guatemala, we learn about the urgent need to apply more politicised and holistic understandings of ‘migration as adaptation’. Criticising the often very dichotomous and decoupled discussion of “in situ adaptation” versus “migration as adaptation”, the authors show how such classifications disregard both the lived and the political realities of coffee farmers on different levels. Their adaptation strategies often evince a complex mix of trans-local livelihoods and adaptation strategies, which are mostly ignored by adaptation policies that exclusively focus on climatic impacts while overlooking the broader social-economic context (Ruiz-de-Oña et al., this issue). Even more critical, the dominant narrative of “migration as adaptation” completely ignores global migration and border realities and often takes on an underlying neoliberal tone of seeking to manage climate migration through labour migration (Foresight 2011; Felli and Castree 2012; Bettini 2013; Klepp and Herbeck 2016). The complex and violent border situation between Mexico and the United States and at the southern border of Mexico highlights the securitisation of both social problems (Bigo 2002) and climate change (Herbeck and Flitner 2010), as well as the mismatch between migration and adaptation discourses on the one hand and policies on the other (Ruiz-de-Oña et al., this issue). Ever more brutal global border and migration regimes remain antithetical to any declarations of intent that speak of international migration as a key adaptive response, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration of December 2018. The sooner these local, regional and global political realities are acknowledged by and included in adaptation and migration discourses and policies, the higher the likelihood more just and transparent climate change adaptation strategies will be conceived and implemented (Klepp and Chavez-Rodriguez 2018).

In their article on climate governance in Jambi Province, Indonesia, Yvonne Kunz, Fenna Otten, Rina Mardiana, Katrin Martens, Imke Roedel and Heiko Faust address the often under- and unreported political implications and second-order effects of climate change policies and interventions. The authors illustrate the effects, especially the unintended side effects, of supposedly socially conscious and climate-friendly certification schemes and eco-friendly labels for palm oil and rubber. They uncover the fundamental differences between interpretations of, and approaches to, sustainability in the Global North, where such policies are designed and often planned, and the lived realities of smallholders in the Global South affected by those policies. Similar to how Ruiz-de-Oña, Rivera-Castaneda and Merlin-Uribe presented their case studies, Kunz and her co-authors also emphasise the need for a more holistic, politicised and inclusive perspective on the effects of climate governance with their methodological choice: They employ a multilevel smallholder telecoupling framework to (a) analyse the connections between actors and resources of different levels and (b) ground a process-oriented approach to both land-use science and the analysis of human-environment relations generally. The telecoupling framework illustrates the challenges that smallholders face in the context of new certification schemes, such as a lack of information on trade-offs, of access to skills, and of technological equipment, in addition to other difficulties in applying certifications. While they also identify some positive effects of such climate policies (e.g., community-building), unintended negative or so-called second-order effects clearly prevail. The most absurd or perfidious peak of these side effects in terms of sustainability might be that a so-called eco-friendly model plantation for rubber, funded by a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) programme, is actually destroying the habitats of the endangered Sumatran elephant (Kunz et al., this issue). The authors examine the new dependencies and hegemonies that are created by the introduction of new actors into climate governance programmes, which can produce new vulnerabilities and conflicts and have a negative effect on livelihoods (ibid.). Methodologically, the authors underline the usefulness of the smallholder telecoupling framework, which has revealed “second-order effects at a distance to the places where the triggers were kicked off” (Kunz et al., this issue, p. 115). Nevertheless,

they also urge us to expand the framework to integrate more critical and power-sensitive issues and conflict spill-overs that a methodology focusing exclusively on coupled systems may otherwise miss.

Alongside these empirically rich case studies, the special issue also includes more conceptual articles. Michael Brzoska explores the linkages between disasters, migration and violent conflict, a nexus in need of further investigation, as the various strains of scholarly literature agree about neither the core element of these linkages nor the mechanisms driving them. Brzoska proposes that to get a clearer picture of these links, international policy interventions need to be included in the analysis of disaster risk reduction, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, migration management and humanitarian and development assistance. Building on comparative empirical evidence of how international policy interventions affect the disputed links between disasters, migration and violent conflict, he argues that a better understanding of these mechanisms can result in better policies.

Ilan Kelman tackles the link, often assumed to be causal, between climate change and migration. He explores different ways of developing a robust, replicable and verifiable method to calculate the number of people migrating (or not) because of climate change. Kelman critically engages with the subjective and arbitrary decision-making in the process of declaring future numbers of “climate migrants”. In particular, he underscores how changing baselines and legitimate concerns about necessary assumptions can produce misleading calculations. This is particularly relevant as counting, calculating and labelling climate migrants has real effects not only on policy-making but on migrants themselves. Today, many authors agree that calculations of future climate migrants are likely to be inaccurate as there are too many incalculable future aspects (<http://climatemigration.org.uk/climate-refugee-statistics/nevertheless>), “big numbers” still play a key role in the media and in the grey literature about climate-related migration and mobility.

Caroline Zickgraf dismantles the ‘mobility bias’ of the study of climate-related migration by engaging with the large numbers of people who are affected by climate change, but do not want to or are not able to move. The few scholarly works that focus on the topic of immobility tend to overemphasise financial constraints as the main reasons for staying. This approach implicitly assumes that people do not choose to stay. Utilising empirical data gathered in Senegal and Vietnam, Zickgraf considerably broadens our understanding of the reasons for staying. Drawing on qualitative interviews, she uncovers how immobility is determined by socio-cultural, economic, and political forces. With a particular focus on international bilateral agreements (Senegal) and a relocation programme (Vietnam), Zickgraf carves out how policy interventions can simultaneously promote mobility and immobility, thereby challenging the traditional dichotomies between mobile/immobile and sedentary/migration policies.

The contributions to our SI show the genuinely political and normative character of the social effects of climate change. One consideration becomes very clear through these illustrations and analyses: Climate change can devastate societies when we pit people against each other and lack the solidarity to co-operate. As examples all over the world show, human beings are able to adapt to and deal with a huge variety of situations, be it extreme heat, cold or other changing or harsh environmental conditions. Our issue demonstrates that the scale of loss that people endure in connection with climate change most strongly depends upon the extent to which communities (Watts 2015) centre human and social environments. This means that alongside fighting for climate change mitigation and fair adaptation interventions, we must work to strengthen multilateral institutions, find new ways to co-operate, activate “imaginative resources” (Hastrup and Olwig 2012, p. 2) to “think out of the box” in climate change adaptation. This is a prerequisite to bolster democratic decision-making processes and to consistently act in solidarity with the most vulnerable and excluded in a rapidly changing political climate.

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